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ABSTRACT

To better prepare preservice teachers for meeting the challenges of student diversity, many universities have strengthened their partnerships with schools to provide sustained, mentored experiences in classroom settings along with concurrent coursework. For the past 5 years, elementary and secondary special education teacher candidates at the University of Southern Maine (USM) have participated in an intensive postbaccalaureate internship at one of five professional development school sites. Students participate in a full range of teaching and professional activities with mentor teachers while taking 10 graduate courses. Program evaluation consisted of interviews with two site-based instructors, and student and teacher feedback from site-based courses in exceptionality at USM's rural partner sites. Three aspects of course delivery were examined: content, pedagogy, and assignments. Eight common factors emerged as critical to successful site-delivered courses in exceptionality: rich content, concentrated use of exemplars, a schoolwide or systemwide perspective, the educational philosophy of instructor, emphasis on reflection, and integrative assignments with classroom-based applications. Based on evidence of desired teacher outcomes in the USM teacher education program, the instructional elements described appear to be effective in teaching site-based courses in exceptionality. (LP)

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PREPARING CLASSROOM TEACHERS TO TEACH DIVERSE LEARNERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Many schools are attempting to restructure the places and ways in which they deliver instruction to students with diverse learning needs, including students with disabilities. The focus of many of these restructuring efforts is to decrease the use of pull-out, categorical, and segregated programs, and to place more responsibility on the classroom teacher and instruction within the regular classroom. Many restructuring efforts even go further ... striving to eliminate tracking and the use of ability grouping within regular classrooms. To quote Warger and Pugach, *The focus for inclusive schools has shifted from excluding students who don't fit the mold to crafting learning environments where all students can succeed.* (1996, p.62). Successful teaching within such assorted contexts requires strategies and approaches beyond those that were included in the preservice courses and experiences of most teachers currently in classrooms. Furthermore, it challenges college faculty to rethink traditional "exceptional child" coursework for preservice teachers, particularly those in site-based internship programs.

How is the need for strengthened teacher education in this area being addressed? Schools in some states (e.g. Maine) have been mandated by their legislatures to require all classroom teachers to take an "exceptional child" course. In other cases district level review teams approve individual professional development plans for each teacher that may include workshops, conferences and courses. For teachers in rural areas, opportunities to participate in either of these options may be limited, and if available they are unlikely to be offered in close proximity to the teachers' schools. Remoteness of rural teachers from centers of learning frequently translates into reduced opportunities for interactions with their college instructors (Knapczk, 1993). This in turn affects the instructors' ability to assess their follow through with new skills in daily practice. Teachers in this situation comprised one of our target groups.

To better prepare preservice teachers for meeting the challenges of student diversity, many universities have strengthened their partnerships with schools to provide more sustained, mentored experiences in classroom settings concurrent with coursework.

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For the past five years at the University of Southern Maine all elementary and secondary teacher education candidates have participated in an intensive post-baccalaureate year internship at one of five professional development school sites. The sites were selected because of their engagement in school restructuring, innovative practice, commitment to teacher education, and established relationship with the University through the Southern Maine Partnership, a school development consortium. Interns are assigned to a school site for the entire school year. They work in classrooms and participate in a full range of professional activities with mentor teachers while taking ten graduate courses (including "Exceptionality"), mostly on-site. It is an intensive year of interning, inquiry, and development as an educator. Interns are particularly critical consumers of coursework because of the many competing demands for their time and attention. Furthermore, for preservice interns in rural sites, contact with a full array of campus resources is often limited. This may contribute to their perceptions that "textbook" and "research" models are remote, irrelevant, and inadequate to address the pressing issues and needs of students in their rural classrooms. Teacher interns comprised our other target group.

Site-Based Teacher Education

Site-based teacher education programs are usually predicated on the utilitarian value of teacher skills. Faculty selections, admissions, curriculum, assessment, in fact, most components of site-based programs are driven by lists of skills or competencies. These competencies in site-based programs are derived from, and are closely linked to, the activities teachers perform on a daily basis. This linkage is assured by the involvement at the earliest stages of planning, of classroom teachers, educational administrators and other classroom level personnel. Since many site-based teacher education programs arise from requests made by these school and classroom level school educators, their influence in the design of these programs and in the participation of teacher interns is incipient.

Site-based teacher education programs often take the shape of a tripartite model where the university, school district, and teacher-intern each bring distinct orientations and goals (Figure 1). The university is focused on inuring teachers to an established theoretical and empirical knowledge base, the school district is focused on adapting teachers to a set of established practices, and the teacher (or teacher in training) is focused on acquiring skills suitable to meet the needs of the students, the expectations of the school, or the requirements of the university! Ideally, this tripartite model offers an opportunity for a union of shared values about teacher education which results in the preparation of teachers well suited to the demands of today's schools and schools of tomorrow.

In an ideal tripartite model, the university, school, and teacher would agree on common goals for teachers. The school and university would then focus their congruent efforts on assisting the teacher in reaching the goals. However, the reality is that while

schools and universities may share certain goals with respect to teacher education, their respective missions differ. This model is represented by the euler circles in Figure 2. In this model there are domains which remain within the exclusive jurisdiction of one party or another. However, the common area in the center, representing the agreed upon teacher competencies and behaviors, provides the shared focus for the actions and interactions of all three parties.

At the University of Southern Maine teacher education programs are designed to accomplish four main outcomes, established in partnership with educators at host sites during the inception of the program. The program outcomes appear in Figure 3. Three program outcomes are particularly relevant to the Exceptionality course: performance-based assessment, reflection, and respect for all learners, and provide a useful framework for evaluating existing course models or building alternative ones. In addition to the broader program outcomes, descriptors of the knowledge, skills/performances, and dispositions teachers are expected to demonstrate have been developed to aid mentors and interns in evaluating their development. The eleven specific teacher outcomes provide criteria for evaluating outcomes of the course evident in participants' projects and performances. Two teacher outcomes addressed in the exceptionality course appear in Figure 4.

Effective Strategies for Teaching Site-based Courses in Exceptionality

The literature indicates that among other things, effective staff development is predicated upon a respect for the learning styles of adult learners, the perceived relevancy of content, and recognition of the need for application/practice of new concepts/skills (Wilsey & Killion, 1882). Site-based teacher education programs, such as the one at USM, pose challenges that are not dissimilar. To assume that you can develop a rural partnership site, place a cohort of interns there, and then deliver the same coursework at the site in the same way that it typically has been on campus is naive. Interns' primary allegiance tends to quickly shift from university courses to their school and classroom. Also, they are immersed in an intensive program that prompts them to prioritize and allocate their time with discretion. Courses tend to be taught in an intensive format, with less frequent, lengthier class sessions.

To answer the question, *What strategies are effective for teaching site-based courses in exceptionality?*, the authors interviewed two site-based instructors from USM's rural partner sites, and examined student feedback and products from site-based courses taught by the authors to USM interns at one rural site and to teachers in four other rural sites. Three aspects of course delivery were queried: content, pedagogy (format of class sessions), and assignments. The information gathered was analyzed with respect to the USM teacher outcomes and perceived relevance and usefulness to instructors at other sites. The preliminary results of this review are summarized in the following discussion.

Eight common factors emerged as critical to successful site-delivered courses in exceptionality:

- Rich content
- Concentrated use of exemplars
- School-wide or system-wide perspective
- Educational philosophy of instructor
- Emphasis on reflection
- Integrative assignments with classroom-based applications

Rich content

Teaching is a time-consuming occupation that prompts context-specific activity. Lesson planning, materials preparation, and on-the spot interventions fill teachers' days. Research, reading, and reflection are perceived as peripheral luxuries by many practicing teachers. Thus, coursework that is heavy on relevant content versus empty rhetoric is crucial in providing preservice interns and inservice teachers with a knowledge base from which to critically evaluate and adapt their practices. Instructors selectively assigned readings, incorporated current research findings, and shared innovative practices of which they had first hand knowledge. While no instructors used classtime extensively to review material included in readings - neither did they use classtime only for activities. Classes were dense with information and it's applications. Instructors all had specific concepts and information that they felt was essential and always included. However, in addition they responded to participants' queries and interests which resulted in each class including diverse content based on the interests of participants as well.

Concentrated use of exemplars

School based adjunct faculty reported relying heavily on their network of contacts within the school system as guest speakers. Guest spots were very focused and illustrated, through the use of a primary source, specific programs, strategies, and perspectives. In an internship program such guest spots can broaden understanding of the purpose and configuration of services at the site, as well as providing the entree for interns who may wish to shadow a related service provider, work with students in multiple settings, or consult about a student or project in the future. Faculty not employed in the site school tended to integrate many exemplars from their own experience in other settings as well as responding to participants' teaching dilemmas. Faculty reported that particularly in site-based courses, the use of specific cases, samples of adapted curriculum and charts from interventions used by other teachers, and and step by step modeling of strategies were critical. Materials developed by other teachers for use in general education settings were particularly well received. Most instructors also reported employing recommended teaching configurations (e.g.. jigsaw cooperative learning groups, peer interview cooperative structures, reading comprehension strategies including reciprocal teaching, etc.) as an integral part of class sessions so participants could experience them first hand. Debriefing might include anticipated difficulties in using the strategy with certain students, and ways to adapt the strategy to avoid those difficulties.

Educational philosophy of instructor

Each of the faculty members studied had strong convictions about the education of all children - including those with disabilities. While all felt they encouraged debate about educational policies and practices (and student evaluations indicated that almost all students perceived that they did), they also openly stated their personal beliefs about educators' responsibilities for all students. One adjunct professor, currently a principal, raised the issue of the influence of his dual role on students' perception of his credibility. He had observed that interns seldom complained as much to him as to their university-based professors, and that a different relationship with the interns was perceived as an administrator than as a teacher, and as an administrator who taught them Exceptionality versus just an administrator. Studying under a building administrator in your district who espouses shared responsibility and adaptive instruction for students with disabilities in the regular classroom, may have different implications than studying under a college-based professor. Of course this attribute can work both ways. As the principal noted, *Sometimes I'm running a faculty meeting and look over at the interns and wonder what they are thinking. What am I doing? Am I walking the talk?* Nonetheless, teachers and interns frequently commented on the influence of course instructors on their dispositions toward exceptional children and teaching.

School-wide or system-wide perspective

All the professors expressed the opinion that it is imperative to look at special education within the context of best practices for teaching all children. Furthermore they encouraged students to reflect on current service delivery and instructional approaches from the perspective of their school(s) as part of an integrative system. Two noted that the criteria for identifying high incidence disabilities is very important, because teachers need to understand why certain students are eligible or not for special education. However, that provides a basis for discussing how teachers meet the instructional needs of students at risk, and other students with diverse learning needs. How does the configuration of the classroom and school enhance or inhibit the learning of students with diverse abilities and backgrounds? They debate what constitutes a full range of supports schools can provide and examine the phenomena of entitlement programs and their impact on schooling. Undoubtedly these issues are raised in other contexts as well. However, the centrality this perspective took in a course one might expect to focus more on individual decision-making, or decision-making around individual students, was striking.

Interns' reflections indicate that the combination of analyzing issues from a school-wide perspective and other "get to know your community and site school" activities had a powerful effect on their dispositions towards exceptional children. Inservice teachers reported that the broader-based analytical approach helped them "step back" and see the contradictions and inequities in practices within their site, and how to address them in constructive ways.

Emphasis on reflection

The importance of reflection in teacher development has been of interest to teacher educators for many years (Schafer, 1967). Reflecting on one's practice in a critical way may involve a very structured process such as establishing criteria and then evaluating evidence in light of the criteria. However, it may also involve more indirect inquiry into a problem or issue. For beginning teachers reflection reinforces the concept that rarely is there one "right" answer to questions of pedagogy. For experienced teachers reflection encourages them to revisit practices that may have become habit and reconsider their practical and ethical implications. One site-based professor, whose school is a member of the Coalition for Essential Schools, centers his course around the central question, "What's special about special ed?" Regardless of the topic being addressed, discussion often comes back to this essential question. Another addresses the concept of exceptionality from the perspective of different disciplines/professions (e.g.. philosophy, sociology, medicine, etc.) and challenges students to rethink the foundation for their assumptions and beliefs about diversity in learners. A third uses collaborative team problem solving as a basis for reflecting on the many possible solutions for a particular teaching dilemma. Participants use cases provided by the instructor initially to learn the process, and then bring in their own one page profile of a teaching dilemma. Most professors also report requiring written reflection on readings or projects. One uses a reflective chain journal that circulates throughout the class for members to respond to issues raised in class and relevant experiences.

Integrative assignments with classroom-based applications

Feedback from participants in site-based courses indicated a strong preference for assignments that were relevant to their daily responsibilities but helped them expand their knowledge. Several instructors used integrative assignments that resulted in one culminating major project. For example, in one site students did systematic observations of students, interviewed related service providers, other educators, and family members, and evaluated samples of student work in the process of producing a case study that was a shared assignment between "Exceptionality" and "Lifespan Development." All assignments in the class related to this single project. One extension was to identify and present to the class a strategy used with the student in the case study, citing evidence supporting the effectiveness of the strategy based on the student's performance. In another case, students prepared a quality research paper which for which the class established the criteria. Research to support the teacher's/intern's conclusions about the topic could include evidence collected through his/her own practice as well as through research reported in printed professional sources. Professors teaching exclusively teachers tended to use more of a menu approach, providing categories of self-designed projects that addressed a professional interest or need.

Conclusions and Limitations

Based on evidence of desired teacher outcomes in the USM teacher education program present in participant work and reflections, the instructional elements described in this manuscript appear to be effective in teaching site-based courses in

Exceptionality. Verification of the relevance of these elements to other rural sites, including those which are culturally diverse from the sites studied in Maine is needed. Also, systematic study of the effects of site-based courses in Exceptionality on the school would be interesting. Does frequent involvement of faculty in inquiry-based projects by interns and participants in the course directly or indirectly effect changes in the climate, policies, or practices of the school? The contribution of site-based courses in Exceptionality to teacher and school development warrants further investigation.

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Figure 1. Tripartite Model of Site-based Teacher Education

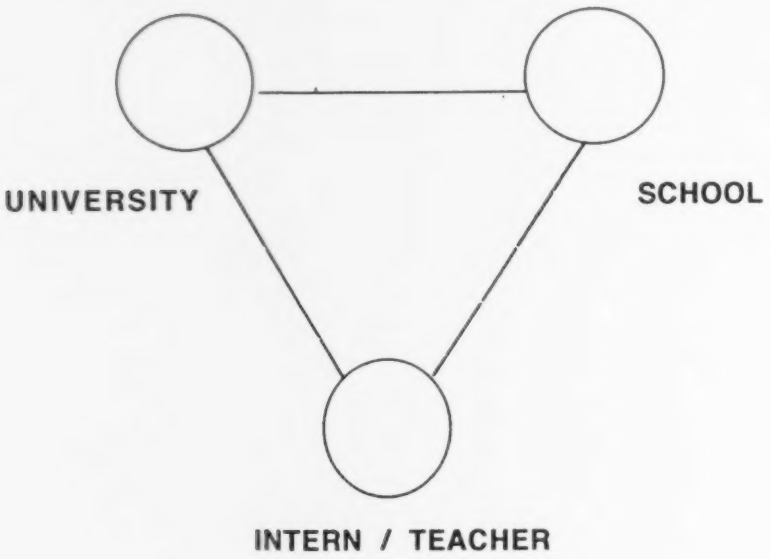

Figure 2. Euler Model of Site-based Teacher Education

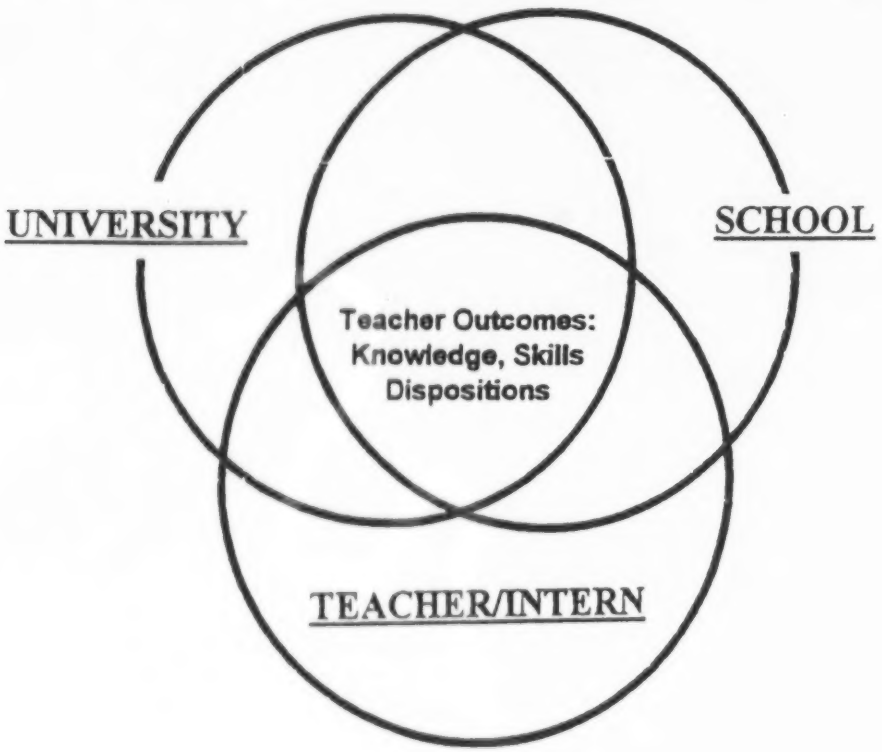

Figure 3. USM Program Outcomes